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AUTHOR Vaughan, Marianne; Morris, Pamela Bell
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ABSTRACT

As part of a 3-year school improvement project, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory conducted statewide issues forums in five states to examine the conditions and needs of rural and small schools. Pre-forum teleconferences were held with advisors in each state to generate prioritized lists of rural educational issues. Advisors gave the highest priority to the following issues: Arkansas, identifying and publicizing strengths of rural schools; Louisiana, developing leadership for parent involvement programs; Oklahoma, middle schools issues; New Mexico, increasing attention to and resources for rural small schools; Texas, impact of educational leadership on policy and economic decisions. Issues forums were attended by legislators; state officials; and representatives of educational agencies and organizations, businesses, and institutions of higher education. Participants were assigned by role to groups and used the nominal group technique to identify priorities for rural education and develop an action plan to address each top priority. Although teleconference issues were related to priorities identified by forum participants, none was among the overall top five priorities identified. Such differences in outcomes supports the idea of expanding the interest groups involved in educational policy and decision making. The top priority for the region and for two states was securing adequate funding for rural education. The next four regional priorities were a well balanced, relevant, community-related curriculum; economic development; community support and involvement; and public recognition of economic trends and the role of education. (SV)

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Marianne Vaughan, Ph.D
Assistant Executive Director
Services for School Improvement

Pamela Bell Morris
Training/Technical Assistance Associate
Rural Small Schools Initiative

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
211 East Seventh St.
Austin, Texas 78701

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Marianne Vaughan, Ph.D
Pamela Bell Morris
Southwest Educational
Development Laboratory
211 East Seventh St.
Austin, Texas 78701

The Rural Southwest in the Year 2002: Implications for Educational Policy

Background

In 1987, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) initiated a three-year project directed towards improvement in rural and small schools in the five states of the Southwest Region. The project surveyed rural educators in Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas to identify needs, and discovered that concerns seemed to focus on specific issues related to school funding and student achievement rather than a global concern related to school improvement. Issues related to student achievement included the needs to improve students' critical thinking skills and staff development, needs which could be met through the Rural and Small School Initiative (RSSI).

During the first year of the project, the RSSI worked with the five state education departments to recruit 30 school sites and used a "train-the-trainer" model to teach critical thinking skills through systematic staff development. During the second year, SEDL staff members and the school sites recognized the role that the underlying staff development model played in the success of the critical thinking training, and subsequently received training in implementing systematic staff development programs. Currently, the RSSI is identifying exemplary staff development programs in schools which are willing to serve as models to others. A training package in systematic staff development also is being developed for dissemination.

Although SEDL staff members were meeting identified needs by providing training and technical assistance to educators in each

of the five states, they continued to remain concerned about the rural educational futures issues. SEDL staff members determined that conducting statewide issues forums as a project activity would provide an effective and efficient vehicle for obtaining more current and consistent information about the conditions and needs of rural and small schools and would facilitate collaboration among educators.

The issues forums were one-day events sponsored in each state by SEDL. Participants representing the state department of education and intermediate agencies, the legislature, educational associations, higher education, rural educators, businesses, and electric cooperatives were invited to discuss concerns and debate issues related to rural and small schools. Forum objectives included sharing information through the presentation of state-specific data by an economist accompanied by responses from a group of panelists, and prioritization of issues through consensus-building activities among interest groups, such as use of the nominal group technique and roundtable discussions.

Issues Forum: Planning phase

In planning the issues forums, SEDL staff members used teleconferencing as a time-saving and cost-efficient strategy to involve advisors from various institutions and agencies in each state. Advisors were affiliated with organizations such as rural school associations, universities, state education departments, and electric cooperatives. They were contacted by telephone to obtain information, identify issues and concerns from the advisor's perspective, and set a date for the teleconference. Prior to the teleconference, SEDL staff members composed a script to facilitate discussion, and mailed each advisor an agenda.

During the teleconference, a SEDL staff member briefly presented the issues which had emerged from the needs assessment data collected from the participants' state. After the issues were presented, the advisors were polled individually to identify the two most important issues. When this list was generated, the advisors were asked if there were any additional issues. Suggestions were elicited from each advisor regarding the location and date of the forum, recommendations for panelists, and details such as

permission to identify cooperating agencies by name. At the end of the teleconference, mention was made of follow-up activities which would be mailed to the participants. The prioritized issues identified during the teleconferences included identifying the strengths of rural schools, specific leadership needs, and middle school issues (Table 1).

After the teleconference, SEDL staff members engaged in conference planning activities which included locating forum sites, contracting with economics consultants, identifying speakers, inviting participants, planning agendas, etc. The advisors from each state were consulted as needed.

Table 1

Issues Forum Planning Teleconferences:
State Rural Educational Issues Identified by Advisors

State	Teleconference Issues
Arkansas	Identifying and publicizing strengths of rural schools
Louisiana	Leadership to address mandates in parental involvement programs
Oklahoma	Middle schools: Issues, implications and actions
New Mexico	Identify strengths that can be used to increase attention and resources for rural small schools
Texas	Impact of educational leadership on policy and economic decisions

Issues Forums

Participants invited to the forums included legislators, state officials, and representatives of educational agencies and organizations, businesses, and institutions of higher education. Each issues forum opened with a keynote address by an economist, who presented information which demonstrated the immediate and projected impact of public education upon rural communities in the state. The economist discussed several areas in which rural economies differ from urban economies: higher unemployment and underemployment, lower incomes, higher poverty, less diversification, lower population growth and density, more self-employment, and greater stratification in the age of the population (Outlaw, Knutson, & Fisher, 1990). The implications for education include the need to integrate educational professionals into the process of community economic development, and the need to broaden the public service functions of the schools.

The keynote address was followed by responses from a panel representing the interest groups attending the forum, and an open discussion was held. In the afternoon, participants were assigned to "role-alike" interest groups and given the task of using the nominal group technique to identify priorities for rural education, and then to develop an action plan which addressed each top priority. A facilitator and a recording secretary who were trained in the nominal group technique were assigned to each group.

The nominal group technique allowed the concerns of the individuals in the interest group to be listed, perspectives to be shared through round-table discussion, and group priorities to be established. The top priorities which emerged from each state are summarized in Table 2. It is interesting to note that although the teleconference topics (Table 1) were related to the priorities identified, none were among the overall top five priorities identified by the issues forum participants (Table 2). Such differences in outcomes lend credence to the process of expanding the interest groups involved in educational policy and decision-making, and underscore the benefits obtained from frank discussion.

Results and Implications

The top priorities which were identified at the issues forums have implications for regional and state policy and decision-making. Securing adequate funding for rural school facilities, salaries, materials, and equipment emerged as the number one priority both regionwide and for two of the five states.

The second top priority was curriculum-related. Several of the groups' priority statements emphasized the need for a well-balanced curriculum which was relevant, specific to the needs of the community, and included options for post-secondary and college-bound students. The emphasis on the relevance of the curriculum to the rural community may have particular implications to situations in which the curriculum is state-mandated. A minor priority was the need for adult education funding and programs.

The next three priorities were closely related. The third top priority was the need for economic development and diversification, which would result in expansion of the tax base. The need for community support and involvement with the school was ranked fourth, and the fifth-ranked priority was the need for public recognition of economic trends and the role of education.

Recruitment and retention of qualified personnel was ranked sixth for the region, but it should be noted that several of the priority statements also included the issue of providing funding to increase salaries. For purposes of clarifying categories of responses, these issues were tallied separately. Staff development and improved teacher preparation, with an overall priority rank of twelve, also was another frequently cited priority related to personnel.

Two lower ranking priorities may be closely related: the need to improve the image of rural schools and rural communities, and the concerns over "outmigration" and declining enrollment. Several statements submitted in these areas suggested the need to identify and capitalize on the strengths of the rural schools and communities, and thus may be related to another low priority, the need for research on rural education issues.

TABLE 2

Summary of Top Priorities Issues Forums

Rank	Priority	Percentage of Groups Identifying Priority				
		AR N=4	LA N=4	OK N=3	NM N=4	TX N=5
1	Funding for facilities, salaries, materials, equipment	.75	.25	.66	.50	.60
2	Curriculum: balanced, relevant, addresses community needs & post-secondary options (college-bound or not)	.50	.75	.66	0	.40
3	Economic Development & Diversification/Tax base	.25	.25	.66	.25	.80
4	Need community support/involvement/public relations	.50	.50	0	0	1.00
5	Recognition of economic trends & education's role	0	.50	.66	0	0
6	Recruiting/retaining qualified teachers & staff	0	.50	0	.50	0
7	Develop quality leadership	0	.25	.33	0	.20
8	Consolidation/Metropolitan vs. rural politics	0	0	.33	0	.20
9	"Outmigration"/declining enrollment	0	0	0	.50	0
10	Changing demographics/emerging minority population	.25	0	0	0	.20
11	Adult education: funding and programs	0	0	.33	0	0
12	Research related to rural education issues	.25	0	0	0	0
12	Staff development/teacher preparation	0	0	0	.25	0
12	Social conditions: diversity,welfare dependency, unemployment, housing, drug problems	.25	0	0	0	0
12	School board power structure/ education/training	0	.25	0	0	0
12	Improve image of rural schools, rural community	0	.25	0	0	0
13	High dropout rates	0	0	0	0	.20

Leadership was another area in which priorities were identified. However, few priority statements clarified whether the leadership was needed in the school, community, or both. The need to develop "quality leadership" ranked sixth overall, but in one state, the education and training of school board members was specified as a top priority.

One surprising finding was the low ranking of issues related to social conditions. Changing demographics and emerging minority populations received a low ranking, and concerns related to the diversity of populations, welfare dependency, and unemployment seemed relegated primarily to one state. Although at-risk students and high dropout rates currently are making headlines, this topic ranked at the bottom of top priorities. This finding suggests the need for further studies related to at-risk students and dropouts in rural and small schools. It may be that social factors pressure students in small communities to complete their high school education, or that economic factors related to the primary industry in the community are influences.

Implications for the Future

The priorities identified for action by the five states indicate the awareness on the part of state leaders of the interrelationship between the economy and education in rural communities. Although many rural education systems are experiencing financial difficulties due to current economic conditions, forum participants demonstrated positive commitments to rural communities. One high priority across the region was to conduct more public-relations activities to improve the image of life in rural communities. The emergence of this priority supports the "rural revitalization" position taken by Darryl Hobbs (1989). According to Hobbs, rural revitalization means

> building on the resources and advantages that are inherent in rural communities to provide a reasonable level of living, good education, good health, and an improved quality of life. [It] connotes being innovative in coming up with new models and approaches...that will more closely match the needs and circumstances of the locality (Hobbs, 1989, 11).

All of the groups developed priority action plans, and several plans emphasized community involvement in educational and economic planning at the local level, as well as tapping into resources available through state agencies and organizations.

In summary, the issues forums provided a viable means for state educational, legislative, and business leaders to meet together and identify issues related to rural education. There was consensus among these leaders that rural schools are an important and vital factor in the quality of life in rural communities, and plans were developed to address the most pressing priorities.

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